

Image and Likeness of Things

What is the proximate genus of painting?

A painting of a rose simulates the rose's interaction with light so that the painting appears to be the rose itself and not a colored surface. When this happens, the painting is said to be an *image* of the rose. The image is not the rose. It is a separate reality composed of coloring dye smeared on canvas following a certain pattern whereas the rose is a three-dimensional structure of living tissues and cells. The image only stands in place of the real rose. Why we would rather hang an image of the rose instead of the rose itself is, of course, a question only each one of us can answer since the motive can only be personal. But, perhaps, the advantage of hanging an image rather than the thing itself becomes obvious if we replace our example with a dinosaur or a whale. That is why the prehistoric caveman was already satisfied with just painting images on his cave walls. He would have found hanging a stuffed elephant quite literally a mammoth task.

In general, a thing that stands in place of another is called a *symbol*. Thus, *an image is a symbol* too. It is then imperative for us to go deeper in our understanding of symbols, determining in the process the proper place images occupy within the multiplicity of symbols.

Notion, Importance, and Types of Symbols

A symbol is a thing that represents another thing. This definition has three essential parts. First, a symbol *is a thing*, which we can call a *subject*. As a thing, it has its own existence or act of being which makes it the same as other things but, at the same time, different from them. Second, this subject *presupposes the existence of another*, which we can call *object*. This object is separate and distinct from the subject. Third, a *relation* exists between the subject and the object. The *relation consists in the subject representing or pointing to the object*. This unique relationship is the distinguishing mark of a symbol. It is what makes a symbol a symbol.

A flag is a clear example. Often times, it stands for a nation or country. By itself, a flag is no more than a piece of cloth with some colored designs in it. But, its whole being does not end there. Seeing a flag is seeing what it represents: a group of people residing in one territory, following one law, and striving for one



Sonrisa Real

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

Painting from a photograph is never recommended. The lights are dispersed and the values are not distinct. Having a live model pose under a controlled environment would be the ideal set-up. But, in the case of this painting, I can almost hear you say "Dream on!"

common good. That is why, disrespecting a flag could bring grave consequences not because the rights of a rectangular piece of textile have been abused but because a whole human society, for which the flag is a symbol, has been dishonored.

Symbols are important for several reasons. But all these can be reduced to only one: they are indispensable for everyday human communication. In fact, a great part of our knowledge is acquired through symbols. When we read books, listen to lectures, or tackle mathematical problems we are using symbols. To convince others to help protect anacondas, for example, we can avoid our own



On the Edge

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

My brother asked me to paint something dynamic for his living room. When I saw this duo in a horse magazine, I found my subject matter. To add tension, I placed them on the edge of a cliff as if sandwiched between the abyss and an unseen foe. Now, the mare has no choice but to come charging back.

extinction by using symbols like words and photographs instead of persuading a live anaconda to aid us in our presentation. When we want to narrate our misadventure in the fish market, there is no need to bring the fishmonger, the fish, the weighing scale, and the other characters of the story. Symbols will suffice.

Symbols can have different classifications since there can be different types of subjects, objects, and manners of representation.

According to subject, symbols can be classified into natural and artificial. Natural symbols are things that spontaneously represent or point to other beings. For example, smoke is a natural symbol of fire, children represent their parents, an identical twin mirrors the other twin, etc. Artificial symbols are man-made symbols. They are either human artifacts or even natural things that have been designated by men to stand for something else. Examples are traffic signs, statues, printed words, mascots, etc.

According to object, symbols can have as many classifications as there are types of objects. Scientific symbols represent items and concepts pertaining to science. Mathematical symbols, religious symbols, military symbols, chemical symbols, logical symbols, musical symbols, etc. are other types.

But the classification we are interested in is according to the manner of representation. There are two types. The first is when the symbol bears no resemblance with the object it represents. For lack of words let us call it *dissimilar, invented or pure symbol*. An example can be the name of a person. A name is nothing more than a group of letters from the alphabet and therefore has no similarity with the person it stands for. But, a name is necessary to indicate an individual. Words, language, traffic signs, icons, emblems, coat of arms are more examples of pure symbols. In ordinary language, when we talk about symbols we normally refer to this type. The second type is when there is a likeness between the symbol and its object. Let us call it *similar or special symbol*. An example can be the photograph of the same person. The photograph holds visual similarity with the person. Pictures, sculptures, statues, images on reflective surfaces or on paintings are examples of special symbols. Both the name and the photo are symbols of the same person. But the name represents the person by merely pointing to him whereas the picture represents him by being his visual resemblance or likeness.

visible features and *indirect* with respect to the rest. From the image of a dinosaur, *anyone* can *directly* know its colors, size and shapes. And if you ever happened to be a naturalized citizen of Jurassic Park, the same image can serve as an *indirect* reminder of how they smell, sound, feel and taste. By contrast, *pure symbols make their objects known only indirectly*. A person encountering the word *dinosaur* for the first time will never know from the word alone what it represents until he bothers to find out what linguists intended it for. And even after finding out, the word *dinosaur* will always remain as an indirect signal for him to retrieve from his memory whatever information on dinosaurs he had managed to store previously.

Naturally, there are gray areas here. For instance, nothing would prevent someone from using an image as the symbol of something else entirely different from what it visually represents. The image of a bull, for example, immediately depicts a wild four-legged beast that some Spaniards love to play with. But we are all quite aware that the same image can remind us of Michael Jordan and company. Or, the image of a crocodile, which shows a large long-tailed tropical reptile, has been used since time immemorial to represent human beings with incredibly huge appetite. With diligence, however, all these gray cases can be reduced to the basic notion of image so they really pose no immediate obstacle to our analysis.



Nativity

(Oil on Canvas, 100 cm x 120 cm)

After years of making *belens*, I decided to substitute them with a nativity painting that can be brought out during Christmas and stored away afterwards. Murillo's version immediately became a candidate for cloning. I put the city at the background to add to the composition. There's only one thing I've failed to do so far - remove the painting after the holidays. *Kaya, sa amin, kahit hindi pasko ay pasko pa rin. Maligayang Pasko sa Inyong Lahat!*

Finally, images themselves have several types. There are naturally occurring images such as reflections on mirrors, images forming in one's eyes, imagination or memory as a result of sensorial perceptions, identical twins, etc. There are also man-made or artificial images such as photographs, sculptures, and, of course, paintings. Paintings differ from photograph in the way the image is produced. And they differ from sculptures where the image is created using all three dimensions of the medium.

Forming Images of the Visible

This conceptual analysis on symbols and images may appear excessive just to explain some pigments splattered on a piece of cloth. But its true relevance will become clear when we try to explain and elaborate on abstract painting, impressionism, cubism, fauvism, surrealism, expressionism and even vague concepts associated with modern paintings like self-expression, interpretation, emotional content, originality,

Images as Special Symbols

From these classifications, it is clear that images in general fall under the category of special symbols. *Images are special symbols that represent visible objects by being a visual likeness of them*. This similitude is the defining element of an image. In fact, precisely because of this likeness it is safe to assume that all *special symbols are images*. When there is no likeness, a thing can never be called an image of another.

In addition, *images represent their objects automatically and immediately*. The moment an image is formed it immediately symbolizes the object of which it is a likeness. No outside intervention is necessary. A parliamentary session is not needed to declare that an image of David Beckham in Madam Tausud museum should represent David Beckham. In contrast, *pure symbols* need an extra action from outside for them to become symbols. They need to be defined and designated as symbols by men through convention, custom, law, national consensus or any form of human declaration. Words, traffic signs, and musical notes, for instance, become symbols by designation.

Furthermore, *images reveal their objects directly and even indirectly*. The revelation is *direct* with respect to the objects'

creativity, taste, etc. For the time being, let us settle with the immediate consequences.

Painting is forming an image of an external visible object on a two dimensional surface using brushes and pigments. The image created is not the object itself but a symbol of it. The image is constituted a symbol immediately upon its formation and by the very mere fact of its formation. In other words, its symbolizing quality is inherent and not an addition from outside. The image reveals the visible aspects of its object directly and the other aspects indirectly. Thus, seeing the painting is seeing the object. A painting is a vicarious visual experience of its object.

Forming images of his preys was surely the intention of the prehistoric caveman when he took his first steps in painting. His failure to produce perfect images could be attributed more to his ignorance on techniques rather than to lack of willingness or to desire for subjective interpretation. And such was the intention of other painters who came after him. Until, at one point in history, someone turned up and chose to paint pure symbols alone. And then we got image problem.

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